



Hegel and students

Hegel, ‘inventor of historical relativism’

Concept of racism impossible without Hegel

It is time to start preparing for where we are going with this course on “Education”. So in preparation for the third part of our course I consulted Andy Blunden, philosopher, educationalist, secretary of the [Marxists Internet Archive](#), world authority on Hegel, and good friend of South Africa. Here is an edited version of our correspondence. I am “VC”; Comrade Andy is “AB”.

VC

For the third week [of the CU “Education” course], I am going to split Cole's "Cross-cultural and historical

perspectives &c" into three, and then for the fourth item in that week I want to use your "The Young Hegel and what drove him" [attached].

I think that the two initial weeks will serve to describe, as well as to distinguish, "education" in the pre-historic and in the historic, and finally hint at the location of Hegel as the necessary philosopher of human development, which strand can then be picked up later on.

What I would ask from you if at all possible is that you help me to find the source of the allegation of Hegel's alleged racism, which you refer to in the following paragraph in "The Young Hegel and what drove him":

"His misogyny and racism, which led him to exclude women and the peoples of uncivilized nations from being creators of culture, derived from his blindness to the fact of the cultural construction of the human form itself. Although this is a limitation in his philosophy, it is one which is very easy to correct for given all that we know today, 200 years later, and has had little impact on his Logic."

Working in the South African context we probably need a bit more than this. It's time to bite this bullet, show up all of Hegel's racism if it in fact exists, and then to show how in spite of this weakness, Hegel managed to produce a universal theory of human

development which rendered the justification of racism impossible. And that so far, this one of Hegel's is the only extant universalist theory of development that can take us forward, and underpin revolution once again, as it did in 1848.

Simply: if I am not mistaken, it is from Hegel that the universal view of history that Engels, for example, expressed so confidently [e.g. in "[The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State](#)"], gets its philosophical underpinning. This vital connection is threatened, or undermined, by the allegation that Hegel was a racist.

AB

The problem is: how to draw a line between Nature and Nurture. All the time we are learning more about how what has always been taken as natural, is in fact a product of culture. In Hegel's day, he presumed like everyone else, without exception, that the differences between genders and between peoples were given by Nature once for all. He knew that people made their own history, but he did not realise that the human form itself was a product of labour. That was Marx and Engels' insight, thanks to Darwin. Hegel had been dead for 45 years by then.

Hegel is in fact the inventor of historical relativism and

the idea that truth is a cultural and historical product. So there is a real irony in someone writing in the 2000s accusing Hegel of being a racist. The very concept of racism would be impossible without Hegel.

I'll give you some links from Hegel: [[here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).]

VC

Thanks Andy [for references in Hegel's work]. If this is as bad as it gets, then I don't think there is really a problem.

This bit of Hegel: *"a pastoral people may treat hunters as barbarians, and both of these are barbarians from the point of view of agriculturists, &c. The civilised nation is conscious that the rights of barbarians are unequal to its own and treats their autonomy as only a formality"* is a very familiar story to Africans. It's also surely more descriptive than didactic

I remember when we were in Mazimbu at the ANC school ("SOMAFSCO"), one of the Tanzanians who had grown a crop, when it was demolished by the cattle of the Masai nomads who used to come there at a certain time of the year, killed one of the Masai because of it.

The hunter-gatherers of the Kalahari are only a few

hours from Johannesburg.

"The civilised nation is conscious that the rights of barbarians are unequal to its own and treats their autonomy as only a formality" describes the French, this week, in Mali. It's nothing but the truth. There is no sense of approval from Hegel, unless I am missing something.

Hegel is correctly describing these matters in "economic" terms, and that is not the same as describing them in racial terms. Africans have generally understood the difference, I think.

Thanks especially for your unequivocal "The very concept of racism would be impossible without Hegel." This is where we are at, still relying on Hegel after all these years, yet hardly able to see him or be aware of him there in the basement, holding up the whole structure.

AB

The relation between the descriptive and the normative, i.e., whether Hegel is just describing how history works, or whether he actually approves this, is not simple. When Hegel says this is how history works, there is a fair measure of implicit approval in that. As in the words "progressive" and "reactionary." This kind of

"master narrative" accusation does stick against Hegel, but it is easy to read Hegel for our times with a greater understanding of these problems than was possible for a European philosopher who had never been outside of a monocultural Germany, and relied on the reports of missionaries and colonists to know about life outside of Europe and North America.

What is important here, for our course on Education, is the confirmation that there is one humanity, and that this humanity is developed by the humans themselves, in labour. The humanist foundation of these ideas left by the Ancients, the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, was built upon by G W F Hegel, and further built upon by two students of Hegel's work called Karl Marx and Frederick Engels.

Hegel is the necessary philosopher of human development, and hence, of education.

Marx and Engels, though well familiar with philosophy, did not write very much philosophy. They relied upon Hegel. Andy Blunden, in the attached essay, writes: *"Hegel drew the conclusion that the German Revolution would have to be made with philosophy rather than with guns and mobs."*

This is in fact largely how things turned out in the 1840s, a decade after Hegel's death, as described by Engels in 1886 in "[Ludwig Feuerbach, Part 1: Hegel](#)", where Engels writes:

“...it was the period of Germany’s preparation for the Revolution of 1848; and all that has happened since then in our country has been merely a continuation of 1848, merely the execution of the last will and testament of the revolution. Just as in France in the 18th century, so in Germany in the 19th, a philosophical revolution ushered in the political collapse.”

The 1848 spate of revolutions, which engulfed Germany among many other countries, was powered by the philosophical controversies that preceded it, which were in turn the legacy of G W F Hegel.

The legacy of Hegel has never been surpassed and it remains capable of powering revolutionary actions. In particular, Hegel’s legacy still has the potential to revolutionise education. For this reason, we will return to Hegel later in the course.

Andy Blunden’s Home Page is [here](#). His index page of links to his writings is [here](#).

- The above is to introduce the original reading-text: [The Young Hegel and what drove him, 2007, Andy Blunden](#).
- To download any of the CU courses in PDF files [please click here](#)